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CENTRE DE LA IMATGE

# SPOTS ELECTORALES

## EL ESPECTÁCULO DE LA DEMOCRACIA

EN LA TV MUNDIAL DESDE 1989

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Roberto Alfa

A few months ago Roberto Alfa (1964-2008), an eminent communication theorist and advertising creator, was murdered in Guatemala during an attempted robbery. In the hotel where he was staying the police found a diary about the last electoral campaign on which he had worked. After a number of vicissitudes that were by no means free of political controversy, his wife decided to make the diary public.

The text you will find below is the complete transcription of the diary for the first time in English. His thoughts and suggestions, his distant, nihilistic and cutting view of a media and political dynamic which he knew so well make the diary into an opening through which we can look inside the electoral clock and the innermost thoughts of one of the men who wind it up.

In line with Roberto Alfa's working method and so as to be faithful to his multifaceted vision of elections, we are also providing a cross interpretation of some of the aspects dealt with in his diary by using texts, quotations and comments to aid the understanding of readers who are less used to this type of professional literature.

**Jorge Luis Marzo and Arturo "Fito" Rodríguez**

### *10 days from the start of the campaign*

*There are ten days to go before the campaign begins and I'm going to start keeping this diary. It's the first time I've done something like this. I don't know why, or who I'm doing it for, nor can I really think of what I'm going to say. All I know is that it's been a sort of impulse decision, a type of spring that I haven't been able to hold down. It's as if I suddenly had the need to write everything down in order to keep things balanced. I have the same vibes I always get with elections: the metallic taste of adrenaline and not sleeping much; the joy of controlling your nerves, taming them, making them into your friends and everyone else's enemies; the private satisfaction of seeing someone who's in the public eye follow a path you mapped out for them; the peace of mind you get from hearing the boss say that he always maps out that path (which means I'm never responsible); the powerful feeling of a magician in front of his expectant audience; telling something without people seeing where the trick lies. Yes, I know these sensations well. Yet there's still something, and I can't put my finger on it, which makes me doubt, which makes me feel out of it for a moment. It's never happened to me before. It is so incipient that I can't even write it down here.*

### Commentaries

The first thing which surprises a researcher when reading Roberto Alfa's diary is that its author says he's never written a similar diary before. According to lots of witnesses, both relatives and fellow professionals, Alfa wasn't very prone to leaving written notes about his work and had always argued for professional discretion in a field like politics which is normally subject to self-interested manipulation. Thus it is a quite startling that a professional of the stature of Roberto Alfa should decide to break with his own philosophy to give a warts-and-all portrait of the world in which he operated.

Roberto Alfa took part in innumerable advertising and political campaigns in the United States, Guatemala, Argentina, Spain, Israel, Germany, Russia, the Philippines and Mexico. His services were hired both by large multinationals and by political parties with varying ideological roots. Combining advertising work with political campaigns was never for him a problem of "compatibilities", and nor – to the surprise of some – was it a problem moving between political parties with very different philosophies. When accused of being a "mercenary", Roberto Alfa once said: "After the fall of the Wall, all politics is merely commercial. The campaigns in which there are great truths to be sold have finished".



*9 days to go*

*This morning we started a shoot. I like publicists, camera operators, art directors: they know what this is all about. And I know when we meet in the bathroom. Few words and measured and mechanical lines. Professional people who don't get carried away by whims or doubts. The boss turned up on set right on time. While he was having his make-up done, we went over the text and the tone. It's not easy trying to convince such a self-centred person. He's repeatedly queried some of the expressions used and says they aren't very colloquial. He's happy close up, when he's pinching and patting people's cheeks in a gesture which revolts me but which he thinks is winning. You've got to give it to him. Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's. Yeah, his smile will be a disaster, but that cheeky self-confidence he's got is good for us. When he says what he really thinks, which doesn't happen very often, he's crystal clear. I've seen him convince his advisors of things which none of them would have given a red cent for half an hour before. It reminds me of a desperate general who went to tell Hitler that there was no petrol left and carrying on the battle was next to impossible. After half an hour with the dictator he came out of the office really excited and shouted out "We're going to win the war, we don't need petrol!" Those moments are electrifying, but they'll never be seen. You can't show those attitudes. Miguel couldn't hope for a better weapon. After a couple of hours of hard bargaining we managed to get him to stick to the script, but we couldn't stop him pointing his finger at the camera or getting off his stool. Finally we've had to drop the steadicams, making it look a bit fictional which I personally find annoying.*

**Sudden split with political audiovisual work**

As the definition of *militant cinema* is complex, it should not be equated with documentary or non-fiction cinema, or solely and exclusively with what is produced outside habitual commercial structures. It is a non-alienating cinema, which does not wish to restrict itself to telling fables detached from human reality but rather to inquire into the conditions of that reality and, as far as it can, to help change them. These political or agitprop cinema movements, one of whose major historical reference points is the epic political and dialectical cinema made by the great Russian filmmakers in the silent movie era, will grow in a series of tendencies whose goal is the transmission of ideology and will become important in various historical and social contexts.

With the passage of time we find, running in lockstep with the technical evolution of the image, the development of communication strategies in both the cinema and on television driven by new technology. But all of this genealogy, historically rich both in theoretical output and in films, would in some way be restricted from the point of view of contemporary "video politics" since the efficacy of marketing and advertising has progressively drained away all ideological argument. It could be said that what would have been the natural development of a militant conception of the audiovisual media has been abruptly cut off in the branch of election ads in favour of the trivialisation of the message, also extendable to the "commercialisation" of political campaigns. The final overlap between advertising and propaganda (even though this division has been a source of much comment since academics became interested in it) imposes itself from the conception to the formalisation of the electoral product and thus triggers a powerful mechanism for change in the political arena.

Nonetheless, this approach might lead one to think that classical cinematographic practice would be different from modern-day political videos in that it would not be trivial, something which would certainly be questionable in the light of the many products derived from fascist and communist ideology.

Walter Benjamin wrote about the sterilisation of politics as a fascist strategy, and from a contemporary perspective this needs to be looked at again with renewed interest. In all recent election campaigns we have seen how the propaganda of very different political movements increasingly yields to specific aesthetic criteria, with a profusion of plastic resources from very varied reference points and applied to the various political and partisan discourses. If Benjamin was right and these fascist strategies contributed to the conversion of humanity into a spectacle in itself, we might start to point out where we are on the road, at the risk of being devastated by the evidence of an abandonment of principles. If the devaluation of the democratic system has become the aestheticisation of politics, it is no surprise that Alfa should have detected the growing trend towards the democratisation of fascism.



8 days to go

*It's full steam ahead. With the audio material we've edited today, the TV ads are now ready. With eight days to go I see them as Vaseline and pus torpedoes anxious to leave their tubes and not able to wait one second longer. The internet ads have been running for two months and doing well. The Net's great: if you don't sign them or they are in the name of the party's youth wing, you can post videos and get around electoral law. In fact according to one of my colleagues, internet is going to make us even richer as campaigns on the Net are now permanent and last all year round, just like the ones for Christmas.*

*Posters, banners, press inserts, radio ads, journalists' blogs, websites, celebrity backers, teams for shooting, editing, production, the extras, the studio; everything is at its peak. And that's not to mention the lighters, biros, caps, electoral programmes, T-shirts, motor-cyclists, coaches and mass catering, as that's not what I'm into. Electoral campaigns are still like wars used to be: there are no precision bombardments but just mass assaults, especially at the start. The party has been working hard on the press and congress for months. Now it's a question of putting a face to all that. And with all the risk that that brings with it, of course.*

Internet, ads and politics

Perhaps we should distinguish the irruption of the internet into political discourse from the irruption of political discourse into the internet. But what concerns us here is singling out the emergence of the internet as a means of getting election ideas across. On the one hand there is a whole new horizon of relations in which the rhizome effect of the medium has led to the "horizontal" production of critical thinking, while on the other, and from a leftist standpoint which calls itself "new", the decision has been made to distribute a fossilized message which has slowly come loose from the new communication circumstances.

The emancipatory use of open technologies, the setting up of cooperative platforms and a conception of politics that is increasingly distant from the spectacle of democracy have led to the development of new notions of "public communication space" which are opposed to the classical idea of an "organ of expression".

Furthermore, Alfa's reference to the importance of the face in the electoral message could come straight from his notes for his university classes: "Do not copy famous photos. Some campaign photos come from unrepeatable historical situations. The photo of François Mitterrand looking at the horizon with the slogan 'La France unie' worked for Mr. Mitterrand. If you've been president of France for seven years, want to make it fourteen years in office and are the symbolic (if not political) heir of De Gaulle and the Kings of France, then that type of photo will be good for you; if you aren't, it won't."

6 days to go

*I listen to the politicians and I think: how I'd like the essence of politics to be transmitted in language and not through language! They speak a language that takes in everything. The real damage done by politics, like advertising, is giving everything a name. That, in addition to killing the politician which everyone has inside them, condemns politics to the perversion of language, the disappearance of silence, of the distance between two consecutive footprints in the sand. With no gap in between, two successive prints are nothing. The word is only designed for the present and hence for forgetting. Bah! Plus a victory wipes everything out and renames everything.*

On campaign language as a deep black hole

In any campaign there are language games. From the slogan as the great catalyst of the attitude of the candidate/party to the "core ideas" of a campaign which are shed like a bunch of grapes in drip-fed sentences, there is a complete considered literary recreation composed with extreme care and correctness which has finally become called "politics".

Political correctness or the politically correct is used as a valued varnish in electoral campaigns; it is one of the great contributions of political marketing to the progressive stupidity of our socio-political relations. Normally a language is required which describes ideas, politics and behaviour in an attempt to minimise the potential offence caused to ethnic, cultural and religious groups. A language which on occasion is tasked with camouflaging obfuscations and attitudes or with sweetening discourses which at some point "went astray". Both the expression "politically correct" and its use have always been controversial, but it is precisely in this controversy where attention is distracted and a new space for confrontation is created, one that deals in lies, reproach and fury.

The election ad as we have known it over recent years, save for flagrant exceptions which have made harshness or discord into their hallmark, has for some time now avoided any questioning of its political correctness, as it subverts the real meaning of words and condemns politics to the perversion of language as Alfa suggests. The "universal" approach divests language of real meaning; it is better to avoid any negative reaction and ensure that you gain audience at all costs by means of the stylistic audiovisual genre. Audiovisual media as the negation of language. The echo coming from the black hole into which the reasons fell will be the script.



## 5 days to go

We picked the main slogan of the campaign months ago: “Of course you can”. And the secondary one: “Think about it and vote”. Nothing new, but then campaigns never are. That’s the thing about the democracy show; wherever you buy your ticket, you’ll always get to see the same performance. In the beginning we argued a lot about the expression “of course...”. Normally you’d just say, “Yes, you can” or “You can”. Adding “of course” as a means of affirmation, of confirmation, runs the risk of seeming didactic or paternal. And though we do want to be didactic or paternal, we don’t want people to notice. At the same time “of course...” gives a touch of ease, of convenience, of feasibility which stresses normality in the idea of change. It’s as if someone had cleared up all your doubts. A woman on the team pointed out one day half jokingly that it seemed like a slogan for Viagra. And that’s true. Precisely because of that suggestive comparison, we decided to use lots of middle-aged people in the ads who could in some way subliminally take in the message. At the same time, “Of course you can” goes down well with young people and women who are always indecisive. We don’t care about old people: they only vote based on old emotions and because the very stupid ones think that voting is like taking out life insurance.

Miguel has also chosen the predictable, more of the same: “The value of things well done”. Nevertheless, I’m surprised by such a long sentence that is so open to interpretation in every word. Naturally they’re going to defend the previous legislature, but there’s something strange in the relationship between the words. It’s as if they’d said: “Well, we’ve done a good job, and so let’s move right along”. I think I already mentioned that Miguel is an intellectual, so these types of slogans shouldn’t really surprise me. Going for that type of thing suggests a campaign based around data, figures and statistics, in other words a camouflage war. That’s no problem. I’m ready for it. If they want a war, they can have one.

## Slogan and adhesive ability

The mission of any electoral message or slogan is to bring a personal (colloquial and close) form of the ideology and programme into the media. It has to be a short and expressive, incisive and mechanical phrase which brings to mind the “core idea” of the campaign. It is, in short, a set of motor words which can’t allow for too many plays on meaning, only the required ones; and for that reason it is an important choice. The slogan is irremissibly associated with repetition; it uses it to take hold in the mind and to inject (above all) a series of images.

A slogan finds its place for interpretation in an election ad, a projection which it does not have in other propaganda media save for the radio. In the ad the slogan may be an argument, conclusion or coda, but what is certain is that it reveals its real enunciative meaning and can reach that much sought-after emotional dimension. If the slogan can be pumped up in the broadcast ad, then the campaign will be a roaring adhesive success.



## 3 days to go

The bosses don’t dare to use the expression “firm hand”. Yet I know we’d be right on the button. The ad has turned out to be too “similar”. The office tells me it should be like that, that it’s good if we are similar to reach out to the undecided voters. That means they have no idea about “undecided voters”. It’s a question of being a ventriloquist, of speaking without appearing to do so, in order that for a few weeks you don’t look like yourself, you can reinvent yourself and demonstrate your charisma (I guess that’s true both for the boss and for me). The important thing is renewing the brand, like when my son gives me a traditional milkshake but in a new ergonomic bottle (maybe the kid is more like me). Politics is pure business ergonomics, a mere exercise in adherence. Here the undecided don’t count for much, they’re like the customers who “still” haven’t bought your product: the question is keeping those you’ve already got loyal and selling the same as the others, but cheaper and more fashionable.

## Slogan and adhesive ability (part 2)

A good campaign has to have an unmistakably adhesive feature. Getting things to stick in people’s ears and eyes and in the senses as a whole is fundamental for getting them to stick in the voter’s heart. Fixing them in the mind will come about as a result of all of this, but only later on; a campaign is a perishable product which must be consumed quickly.

Some time ago there was a story in the papers about a group of US researchers who had discovered the part of the brain which makes us get hooked on songs. They get stuck in your mind, you carry them around with you and you get caught humming them in the most unexpected places. It doesn’t matter whether you hate these ditties as they stay hidden before springing out on you, and when you hear them again you hum along almost without wanting to. This is a good time to recall Alfa’s poetic remarks (see below) about the repetitive games he would play with words as a child.

But in our medicalised society someone has already thought about whether it would be possible to find a cure for this torment. There are research projects which are trying to solve the mystery of the catchy summer tune, of the smash hit anchored in this inhospitable part of our brain. Finding those features and being able to control them would be a gold mine for audiovisual production.

A group of scientists from Dartmouth in the United States have found the part of the brain where a song is recorded in our memories; it is in the auditory cortex which coordinates all the information from our ears. The American researchers experimented with volunteers and made them listen to well-known songs. They realised that when the tune stopped, the auditory cortex remained active which meant that the catchy song continued playing in the brains of the volunteers.

Up until now theories had focussed on the ideas of Professor James Kellaris, who argued that a hit produces an itch in the brain which can only be relieved by mentally repeating that song. Humming it would thus be like scratching. With no time to lose, the record industry has got down to work because this means that hit songs can be produced by computers. A program called *Hit Song Science* is already being developed which compares a song with the 3.5 million best-selling songs over the last decade to draw up a report. Stemming from this sophisticated initiative it is interesting to speculate what the “standard” jingle might be for a campaign and what factors need to be taken into account. And of course it would be even more interesting to be able to enter all of the catchy songs, rhymes and jingles of the world’s best electoral campaigns into this program to get the ultimate electoral melody, the one which takes the voter straight to the polling booth in any place and in any situation. They would be pulled along by their ears, of course.

### 2 days to go

*I read yesterday’s entry and I say it again: being undecided is just so much smoke, but I earn a lot of money by getting loads of people to breathe it in. Making them cough is my job.*

If a cough were political it would seek to eliminate the “information overload” in people’s information diets. A political cough is either productive or it isn’t. Potential voters, anaesthetised by the huge quantity of information which they receive with only brief time intervals in between, cannot digest all of this diverse and enormous material under ideal conditions which call for comparison, criticism and the time necessary to evaluate it. Information today does not mean action and there is information which we can’t do anything about. The Spanish writer Juan José Millás refers to it as “a datum without information”: “It is, in effect, a datum with the taste, smell and texture of a real datum, albeit manipulated in such a way that it has no references. Hence it is a useless datum: it doesn’t make you fat but it doesn’t feed you either. If it did feed you, then you and I would be wiser than Solomon, as we do nothing else except ingest data on a large scale.”

A datum without information, like a non-productive cough, finally leads to disgruntlement when faced with the impossibility of cleaning out our information menu and, from the voter’s perspective, it should be said that election ads will give you a cough... for spitting.

### Day 0

*I get back from sticking up the first posters and it’s very late. It’s all gone as usual. When I got to HQ they had laid on a few drinks to celebrate the fact that tomorrow it’s on. They called it a “party”. One of the bosses came down to encourage us. They can’t help it, they’re all floating. They say that war brings out the best in men. They feel important; hordes of journalists are constantly knocking at the door, image, image and more image. They have to go to interviews, debates, talks, meetings, dinners and parties, all of them packed with cameras. Someone recently told me that some candidates have invited journalists to join their entourage and film them behind the scenes, so that they*

### Dry or non-productive cough/political cough

“Clinically-speaking a cough is defined as a brusque and explosive respiratory movement designed to eliminate material from the respiratory system,” Roberto Alfa used to say jokingly. “It is a defensive mechanism. A dry cough, by contrast, does not lead to expectoration and is not productive.”

### Images which cover up images

Audiovisual electoral campaigns, like street graphics, are both a celebration of advertising images and a subtle work of concealment. Any election cancels out other possibilities. The decision about the audiovisual focus of the ad defines the way in which these other images will be “covered up”; those from the wide range of problems which are (ought to be, in reality) the stuff of politics. Some are chosen to cover up others. And in a loop which is not exempt from perversion, this covering up is announced as a revelation which is none other than that of the image (simply the image) of the leader as a political issue.

*have material that’s striking because it’s supposedly private. Of course it’ll show the boss taking flawless decisions in private and surrounded by his closest aides and advisers. We’ll see if they bring it out. It’s a hot potato.*

*Before I went home the boss came up to me, and I reckon he was a bit sloshed. He gently took my arm, brought his face close to mine and said, while he smiled that smile of his: “So?” “You’ll win a couple of million votes. That’s all I know,” I said. He kissed my face.*



### Day 1

*This morning I had a nosebleed in front of my son. I don’t want to fool anyone. It was lucky it didn’t happen in front of the boss. I know we are going to win; we have to win. Without anyone asking for his opinion, which is why bosses are bosses, one of them told me: “Don’t worry, you’re riding the winning horse.” I felt like reminding him that one thing is the rider and the other the horse, and that I provide the horse. The harness is temporary, but as the Turkish president once said, “Democracy is just a tram which takes you to your destination.” My destination is winning, to make sure the horse always adjusts without a glitch to any rider. Doesn’t matter which country or which candidate. For me a campaign is a train which takes me to another campaign. Not forgetting that is the quintessence of this job.*

*Let’s see how everything goes. I know Miguel, my opponent, is a tough nut to crack. We’ve been up against each other before. His boss is what worries my boss. Because even though there are other candidates, who the hell cares about them? Miguel pretends to be an intellectual but he’s just an old dog like me. Once, years ago, he told me that the main technique for sabotaging an enemy’s campaign is to bribe the boss of the printing works which produces the posters. If you know the campaign slogan in advance, you can put on the hurt. I remember how I laughed when I tried this out in a previous campaign: I told the guy who was printing our material to let himself be bribed by the opposing candidate and give out fake information. We lost the elections but I still remember how they took a week to get over the shock.*

### Electoral campaigns

“The day on which everything starts and everything finishes. The start of the electoral campaign is greeted in political marketing as the great day. The electoral campaign for the electorate is the start of a spectacle that is increasingly insulted, in which everything sounds excessive, in which the news is observed from a different point of view and suspicion takes control of events and outcomes.” These words of the German politician Gregor Gysi serve to introduce the following questions: Should an election campaign be seen as pollution of what is social? What is the real need for a campaign? Could there be other ways of carrying out an election campaign? What are the real effects on politics of the progressive audiovisualisation of campaigns? This is what Alfa once said: “There is as much ignorance among the electorate about what an election campaign is as there is ignorance about day-to-day politics. Meetings between the real world and the world of electoral fantasy always take place in the arid terrain of disagreement and susceptibility.”



## Day 2

Today, I don't know how, I found I was haranguing the entire production team. Yesterday a poll came out which wasn't that good for us. As I was talking and my voice got louder, I realised that I was behaving like a candidate with those damned tics which I so love and hate at the same time. Doesn't matter. The point is that some of the members of the team said we had to add new arguments to the campaign to nuance it more. I said absolutely no way. Everything is based on repeating the same thing over and over again until the slogan sticks to people like glue. I've always wanted to run a campaign like the ones in lots of countries throughout the Americas: catchy songs, rhythms and jingles with no more than a couple of lines and which are also repeated on the screen like in karaoke. I can't do that here. They'd call me a populist. Populist... When the day finishes some time in the early morning, words are pullulating in my stomach like when I was a kid and I repeated them over and over again to make them lose their meaning. Populist is one of them. I remember when I was a student how I was impressed by something said by a Dadaist: "The damned tongue, stuck to dirt like in the hands of money changers who have been fingering coins." We're not going to change a comma in the script. There are three ideas. When they're dirty from being fingered so much, when even our people are sick to death of hearing them, then will be the time.

## The gasping of political marketing

Political marketing can be seen as a set of research, planning and communication techniques which are used to map out strategic actions and tactics throughout a political campaign. In principle it seems inadequate to use the idea of marketing, combined with other concepts such as market, product, sale, consumer, profit, etc., in a sphere such as politics, which appears to belong to another kind of phenomena. Nevertheless, and this is becoming increasingly apparent, some aspects of political life can be approached using ideas that are analogous to those to be found in economics. Thus meeting a need (part of the logic of the market) can be equated with choosing an alternative (as occurs in politics). But even though the strategies, tactics and techniques have a definitive role in this sophisticated machine, there is also a need for other more stimulating incentives, usually branded as populist.

In the sphere of political marketing, the election ad is heard as a polyphonic gasp, like a choir of sirens. It is a shameless cry of pleasure or a disproportionate ejection. The pornography promoted with the ad calls for terse and penetrative arguments, and in this respect the ad is a powerful reason for excitement and passion.



## Day 3

*A guy has been on telly who says that there are biological reasons for political charisma; that the hormones, neurones and what have you make up 35% of the raw material of a successful politician. It's enough to make you piss yourself. I'll always remember what that Argentinean politician told me, the night I won the election for him: "Roberto, those who think the world is not a conspiracy are extremely badly informed." He was one of the few politicians I've come across who deserved my respect. I read a short while ago that when language is placed at the service of war "it renders people unfeeling and empties the imagination, thus allowing the conflict to break out." More fuel to the flames.*

*I really think that people vote because politics doesn't affect them. Politics is seen as something positive when it doesn't create problems and negative when it interferes in people's lives. Bit of a paradox. If it affected people, they'd all be out in the streets protesting. People vote because it's a game, an anonymous bet for which you have absolutely no responsibility.*

## Charisma, leadership and natural selection

"Hormones, neurotransmitters, neurones and, of course, physical appearance are biological factors which may account for up to 35% of the raw material of a politician who reaches the top of the greasy pole," says Catalan psychiatrist Adolf Tobeña. "Dominant, cruel, persuasive and manipulative individuals are ideal for the struggle for power and these attributes depend on the neuronal circuit and hormonal influences," he argues in his most recent book *Mind and Power*. There is no doubt that Alfa refers to this book in his ironical allusion.

This news item, which appeared in the newspaper *El Mundo* on 21 February 2008, broaches the delicate question of biological predetermination in political leadership. While the thorny side of the issue may lead to initial rejection, what is true is that when we say "politicians are made of different stuff" we are saying something very similar to what Tobeña asserts in his book. However, it is also the case that the popular statement would appear to refer to other issues that have more to do with the prestige of the political class, said to be in ruins for decades and in permanent rehabilitation. This rehabilitation has been taking place since the entry into political life of certain politicians, whose presentation often leads to the appearance of "regeneration", "bringing a breath of fresh air" or "honesty", as if this quality were an extra value in public administration.

The trivialisation of news and politics along with making them into a spectacle has placed more emphasis on individuals, on the battle between public figures, and has consequently tended to cover up social and structural problems. The main consideration for teams of election advisers thus becomes the way in which the candidate they happen to be working for appears in the media. This leads to the fragmentation and simplification of events for which the politicians offer radical and simplistic solutions and there is no capability to evaluate or qualify their efficacy. Everything is subjected to the rhythm of television and the standing of the candidate's image instead of to the time required to solve the problems and the management ability required to do that.

## Day 4

Morning meeting to look at the polls. Matilde, one of my aides, says that we aren't taking off because the people don't know the more human side of the boss and that we ought to focus more on showing his life, on bringing him down to ordinary people's level. Maybe so. We immediately called the boss's wife to ask her for some home videos and photos. While I was looking at them I was surprised to see such a dull life. No really fun photos; no films that engage you. If someone saw my photos, would they have the same sensation? Anyway. Finally we put together something with this poor man, er, material. We don't want to show him in swim trunks. A few photos as a young student, playing football, next to his former boss, smiling with his son or surrounded by leaders from other countries gave us enough for a nice life story ad. Obviously the final shot is of the boss and his wife. No looking straight at the camera, because the wife will get it from the press the next day. We chose a shot from a home movie showing the two of them smiling while looking away from the camera and we slowed it down until the end of the ad. By the way, there was a heated debate about the soundtrack which was to go with the images. Some said that we had to use a bit of modern music with lyrics about having a good time. Others thought a voice over from the wife would be better. A few suggested the boss's voice. I didn't say anything because I was absolutely sure about what we were going to use. In a meeting you should always speak last, pick up everyone else's ideas and make them look like yours. That's all leadership is. Well, we went to see the boss to see what he thought. And it went just like I thought it would. Not his own voice – that would be vain – and no way his wife's voice. We ended up with ventriloquism, of course! Matilde found a speech in the parliament in which the boss briefly said what the honesty and honour of a politician is based on. Everyone was happy. Now they think that everyone knows the boss better. They'll never know him, but at least they'll have the illusion of a kind father.

## Curriculum

Going back to that (allegedly) predetermined being that is a political leader and prepared to lend credence to the thesis of biological evaluation, the need for honour and excellence in all aspects of their lives could equally be joined to this feature, and this does indeed happen. Yet as we all know, the main pitfall lies in combining excellence in the public and private spheres and it is precisely in the search for cracks between these two areas where a certain type of press and a certain type of opposition find their gold mine which results in a degree of media entente between press and opposition.

Moreover, you also need to look at the history of electoral political parties to understand the importance of the figure of the leader. Parties have traditionally been formed based on social class. There were some class interests which achieved a critical representative mass among the political parties. Certainly the story of how the left and the right were constituted is marked by this dynamic. Thus political groups are the outcome of the strategic linkage of numerous political families from the same tendency. Nevertheless, it is imperative to rework this reading in the light of the processes by means of which political parties select their representatives nowadays. Why should one candidate and not another end up becoming the leader or candidate of a formation? Let us turn straight to Roberto Alfa in search of an answer. Alfa wrote thus in 2001, at the end of an election campaign in Mexico: "There are so many people in a political party that it is quite reasonable that many should wonder about the real reason why someone becomes a candidate and hundreds of others don't. The answer is very simple: money. That candidate who offers financial guarantees, or the confidence required to get hold of them, is the one who wins in the end. This obviously results in a struggle of interests, pledges and sometimes corrupt practices which lead to an extreme situation: there is no way back. Today, candidates do not represent the interests of one or another of the wings or families of a party, but instead turn into mere bank guarantees or financial insurance. In many countries if you do not get at least 5% of votes or seats you will not be entitled to state funding, and hence all of your investment will have been wasted." It is, by the way, here that the direct criticism that Alfa expresses in his diary of the political parties can be seen, when he

calls them "private companies in search of customers". David Armand, in his now classic book *Power and Negotiation*, explains why in recent years the majority of candidates do not use the habitual party staff to draw up their campaigns but instead set up their own professional campaign teams which are completely dissociated from the "apparatus". Even more interestingly, Armand notes how, and more often than the person in the street realises, many of these professionals end up forming part of government once the electoral victory has been achieved, with the consequent loss of "transparency" in political management and responsibility. Parties increasingly do not know the campaign of their own candidate, which means they are often faced with paradoxical situations such as when part of the natural voters of a party vote against its candidate even while they still support the main planks of the party's position.

The reader of Roberto Alfa's diary might be surprised by the tone he uses when he talks about his professional success in contrast with the failure of the electoral results of his client (see the last entry in the diary). While his party loses the election, he thinks of his work as being a victory. This interpretation has to be seen in the light of the internal electoral mechanics of contemporary parties discussed above.

## Day 5

All of the press picked up on the life story ad and a number of spoofs of it have already appeared on the internet. In just one day! I'm pretty damn good.

Today I had to go to one of those big meetings. The usual stuff: sports centre decorated with hundreds of banners and posters; buses packed with old people who've been promised a soft drink and a cake; dozens of young supporters with their girlfriends (the females never bring their boyfriends, who support other parties) who've been promised a cap, T-shirt and lighter. Then there are those who make a living out of the party: those who work in town councils which we, sorry they, run; those who work in allied companies and all those other bystanders who can't resist the lure of a show, whether it's Billy Smarts' circus, a free benefit football match or an electoral meeting. What's the point of a meeting? In itself, absolutely none. But it's really handy in other respects. One of them is that it means the second-rank members of the party can get up on stage and have their photo taken with the boss when he's finished his speech. That way they can show off whenever they have people round and they're asked about the photo they've got on the table. Another of the good points

## The campaign as ritual circus and disorientation strategy

An emotional character and the dramatisation of ceremony are things a campaign needs to have at key moments, as they are a demonstration of strength. The candidates are the celebrants of this ritual in which the rites of confrontation and consensus alternate to foster a response in which the mass recognises itself. Choosing the street as the stage for this type of ritual is always a spectacular demonstration and can have "revolutionary" connotations. But the media show of confrontation creates a climate of electoral tension which may be technically necessary depending on the approach to the campaign. TV ads, the rise of internet, polls and big name "signings" are nowadays gradually replacing discussion in public squares and the direct expression of citizens as the means for manufacturing consensus.

We've simply called them liars as well. War takes place in the midst of confusion: confusion is probably one of the most valuable weapons which power has found in the new possibilities offered by digital technology. In contemporary society, the media overexposure to which people are subjected has significantly altered their situational coordinates. Time and space have been abolished in the sense in which they have hitherto been known and disorientation has become a sort of control mechanism which can be used to divert attention or focus it on smokescreens. In the analogical or lineal world, you knew where you were starting from and could predict where you were going to get to. In the digital world doors open up with every step;



about meetings is of course TV. It's a question of costs. An ad is only shown at agreed times and only on public TV stations (at least in Europe); by contrast a meeting is on the news and on all radio and TV stations. A meeting is also good on TV because the candidate is surrounded by real people and not by the extras you get in an ad. Of course, there's nothing "real" in politics. The people who appear behind the boss when he's talking are completely staged; look closely at them the next time you see a meeting on TV. There are always young people who are constantly nodding in agreement. And there's always a black person. You won't always see pretty girls like you do on TV game shows – the viewers might think they were just a bunch of spoilt rich kids – but instead there are guys and girls who look like nerds as if they were about to invent a new Yahoo! that will make them into stars. To be sure this is one of the key factors about modern shows: that the concept includes the default spectator. Bernini said the St Peter's Square was nothing by itself, but takes on meaning as a pilgrim sees it gradually filling up with other pilgrims. Houdini, the great magician and founder of my profession, always said that the fundamental moment in an illusion is when someone comes up on stage as an "innocent member of the audience". When the spectator sees other spectators with the artist it's the best time for "diverting the viewer's gaze", for "redirecting attention". In many television programmes, sets are built around the audience who can be seen behind the presenter. I'm telling you, one day we'll see news broadcasts with an audience in the background, I'm sure of it. Today you see the editorial staff working behind the newsreader. It's just a question of time. A TV sitcom with no canned laughter isn't funny. The laughter gets viewers to follow the reaction of the audience. In short, as you know, no-one goes into a bar which doesn't have any other customers. If you want people to come in you have to hire some extras.

The meeting was soporific, but the boss almost couldn't speak what with all the cheering and applause. I have another fortnight ahead of me listening to the same set phrases, funny stories, jokes and grandiloquence. Doesn't matter where, because the place is TV and you can't say different things on different days.

The debate's approaching. There's a lot of pressure on the boss but he's coping with it well.

navigating leads us to places which at the beginning we hadn't intended to go to, and this ability to condition our drift conceals strategies which are bound to very diverse conditioning mechanisms. If letting yourself be carried along by disorientation can be fascinating, as in the circus, it is equally fascinating to access the psychological, technological and ideological processes which operate in these mechanisms, a genuinely new dimension of control, and a new place of power. The ship's controls, its bridge.

"The big event looming upon the 21st century in connection with this absolute speed is the invention of a perspective of real time that will supersede the perspective of real space, which in its turn was invented by Italian artists in the Quattrocento. It has still not been emphasized enough how profoundly the city, the politics, the war, and the economy of the medieval world were revolutionised by the invention of perspective." Paul Virilio, *Speed and Information: Cyberspace Alarm!*



## Day 6

Absolutely everyone is talking about Lakoff's book. This morning as I was going over the press summaries, I saw a number of columns commenting on it and citing his maxim that "people vote because of their identity and their values, which do not necessarily coincide with their interests". He's a smart guy. I heard him once at Rockridge and he knows what he's talking about. He knows that advertising is only on the side of the conservatives, never the progressives. And here they want to get him, because he's revealing to all and sundry the magician's tricks, the ones that I and many of my colleagues use. He knows that once your framework of ideas and metaphors is accepted in the discourse, everything that you say simply becomes common sense. It's a question of juggling with the language, moving the meaning of words towards your frame of reference using suggestive metaphors. I fully agree with him. I've been doing that for years. It's been a continual struggle with customers: getting them to forget about words and phrases coined by the combative left; getting them to focus on speaking about the same thing but with different words and similes; in short getting them to steal the language ownership of ideas in politics. Just a couple of weeks ago I was able to convince the boss to use the expression "with order and rules" whenever he wanted to appear firm. The issue is about moving "order and agreement" towards "rules", subtly making the concepts overlap. It's been really successful as the media and even some of the other candidates are now using the expression. You have to bring them onto your own ground, close them in with the right words.

## The framework of ideas is more important than the ad

The references to George Lakoff's argument and his celebrated book *Don't Think of an Elephant: Know Your Values and Frame the Debate* should be set against the backdrop of the emphasis that Alfa always put on understanding political discourse in the framework of a scenario of references which could overcome mere reading of the political terms and concepts and which stressed the need to persuade political readers by means of a contextual identification of the messages. Both Lakoff and Alfa envisage the need to avoid the hijacking of some words by political parties. Appeals to "taxes" or "security", for example, are a fundamentally "conservative" exercise but one which has had such success that in the end it has become part of the progressive message, albeit much to the latter's regret. Both specialists think that the right has been more successful in generating this interpretative framework, while the left has always been more subject to a "one-off" interpretation of political terminology. In this respect Alfa, who was always more comfortable in his professional career when working with the right, appears to suggest, according to what he writes in his diary, that the substantial advantage of conservative discourse based on the creation of reference frameworks may disappear if the left becomes capable of handling the same strategies.

The undoubted impact of the thinking of Lakoff and Alfa on the field of political marketing has meant that many party organisations attach more importance to the hidden and continuous creation of lines of influence in the press rather than centring almost exclusively on those months which feature election campaigns. The increasing attachment of media groups to specific parties at a time of digital reworking of the structure of communications would appear to suggest that the political parties have taken very seriously the need to set up extensive interpretative frameworks which take in a horizon that is more than just electoral concerns. From this point of view there is a need to understand the particular ways of speaking in news bulletins, the strategic employment of words and the use of political debates (with the direct intervention of users and citizens) throughout the course of the legislature.

*I have just had to reread parts of Lakoff's book. I'm also going to transcribe a paragraph for you here that I found particularly interesting about another great truth; most people are conservative and progressive at the same time and the difference lies in where you put the emphasis. There are people who are right-wing for some things and left-wing on others. I've always said that there is a single voter with three profiles: the Profoundly Superficial, on the right, and the Superficially Profound, on the left, and those in the centre who always vote for the IPD, the Independent Party Depending. The thing is that all of them vote, which is why there is only one type of voter.*

*Anyway, here's what Lakoff says about this and how to win over the ones which some foolishly call "undecided": "Your job is to get into their mental territory. Your goal is to sound them out and find out in which aspects of life they behave like conservatives and in which ones like progressives. For instance, ask them which things they are most concerned about and how they face up to them. Then you have to connect it with politics. For instance, if they are liberals at home but strict in business, talk to them about home and family. Tell them that their parents won't have to sell their house nor mortgage their future to pay for the medical care and drugs they need. Seek out stories in which your mental framework works." What a sharp customer. As for the rest, he said something that made me purse my lips: that being in a good mood is to the advantage of any good communicator, because it makes them look as if they are happy with themselves. I have to make the boss smile more. But how the hell can I do that if when he laughs he looks like he's got pegs in the corners of his mouth?*

### **A smile is the shortest distance between two people**

There are election campaigns in which humour plays a key role and others where humour is merely a coma, a full stop or an exclamation mark in the underlying text. Normally humour in a campaign indicates that there is no real power alternative, but that the possibilities of having an impact may be significant. Humour is a counterpoint in politics, as the gravity of electoral struggle tends to overload the message and make the medium unbreathable. As Michael De Certau has pointed out, if power and authority are committed by their visibility, jokes and cunning are useful to the weak, which operates outside this scenario of media power: "Thus while a joke is juggling with ideas, astuteness is juggling with actions." Humour is a fundamental means of demythologizing politics, but who with real ambitions would stand for office with humour as their main surety? Because the fact that we see some political initiatives as being funny does not mean that they were intended to be...



### **Day 7**

*The debate. A tiresome thing I can't stand. I've already got my ads, thanks very much. The candidate goes along with his lines memorised, I can tell you that. He spends all day shut up somewhere trying to memorise the "copies", the "core ideas", the rhythm of the presentation, the emphasis. He needs to know when to use a fact or a photocopy or use a graphic. He knows he has to stick to the script; at most, denial or answering from the right list. He may not under any circumstances get embroiled in an unforeseen argument. The outcome is rigid and even laughable figures. Of course all that is camouflaged with suitable television tension, "the moment of truth". That's why I find them boring; it's like watching a clockwork object work after you've wound it up. The only interest is in seeing whether it will work, not seeing what you've already seen hundreds of times during rehearsal.*

*The only thing that attracts me about debates is the back shop in the television studio. Few people know how it works. To begin with the candidates arrive surrounded by an enormous retinue: bodyguards, image advisers, communication advisers, secretaries, some party bigwig, public relations. A reception room is set up for all these people dominated by large monitors and full of sofas and tables covered in canapés and drinks. The station hosts give them a royal welcome because they know they are going to make a killing; it's one of the times of year when they make the most money out of advertising. They've also fitted out dressing rooms for each of the two teams so that they can follow the debate with some degree of privacy. The atmosphere is like a school: stupid jokes, a childish sense of being at the vantage point of the world, fights about sandwiches and the normal dumb remarks to ease the tension. When the debate itself*

### **Television debates and dropping a biro**

There is a golden rule in political marketing which is that the party which is winning refuses to go head-to-head in the TV studios. It is said that the candidate with the greater popular support should not accept a debate. Any slip-up that jeopardises those advantages might be fatal, because the cameras can play dirty tricks on you; Bush's furtive glance at his watch, Perot's stool which showed up how short he was and so on. The tension in a TV debate is greater than at any other time in the campaign and hence it is such a powerful television event. The advisers to the two main candidates in the Spanish general election in 2008 admitted that their chief nightmare was that "during the debate broadcast live on television, their candidate would drop his biro or sneeze or some other unexpected eventuality of that kind would come up".

The TV debate, its date, place, scenario, moderator, types of chair and dominant colours are also a political debate. The loose ends and details which the "negotiators" from each party try to control are political strategy operations. Political strategy is openly declared as image strategy.

### **Discipline vis-à-vis control**

The changeover from a disciplinary society (based on "order and rules") to a controlled society is something defined by Gilles Deleuze following the theory of Michel Foucault. Since then we have learnt that the panoptic (in which one looks at everyone) has given way to the synoptic, which means that many can look at a few, who turn into models of privacy via seduction (with the mass media being the perfect scenario here).

Control is, therefore, something "democratised" and its denomination does not transmit the rough subjugation which the "order and rules" of other eras appears to foster. Thus order is no longer established so much by punishment but rather through pleasure and the mechanisms which administrate it, or in other words the consumer society in which, to close the circle, video politics plays an active role.

starts, everything becomes surreal. Seated in front of the television, the entourage cheer on their candidate, applaud their clever phrases, whistle the opponent, make barbed remarks, thump the walls to rub the noses of the opposing team in the next door dressing room in some sharp remark or especially ruthless attack. Quite often someone from the TV station has to come along to ask them to keep the noise down. I hate going to these things, but I have no choice. And I know I'm not the only one. I saw Miguel in a corner, taciturn as always. We exchanged stealthy looks and greeted each other with a brief raise of the chin. Neither of us dared to take the first step. Battles always leave their scars. Finally I went up to him to shake his hand, but more like two football managers at the end of a game: quick and with no hanging around.

When the debate finished, everyone congratulated everyone else, not for the candidate's performance but for giving the right advice, for having suggested a tone of voice, for having chosen a tie. It's the excitement of a student when they've finished an exam and the tension is released. The boss's back is constantly patted. When he gets back into the car that is to take him home to bed, the first thing he'll ask is about how well he did, in other words whether he stuck to the script we'd written for him. It would never cross anyone's mind that he was asking about how successfully he'd got across his programme or his ideas.

"In the main, the contemporary masses are no longer masses capable of joining together in riots; they have become part of a system in which their property as mass is no longer adequately expressed in physical assembly but rather in participation in programmes related with the mass media. (...) In it one is a mass of people while remaining an individual. Now one is a mass of people without seeing the others. The result of all this is that contemporary, or if you prefer post-modern, societies are no longer immediately guided by corporal experiences: they only perceive themselves via media symbols of masses, discourses, fashion, programmes and celebrities. It is at this point that the individualism of masses of our time has its systemic foundation." Peter Sloterdijk, *Die Verachtung der Massen. Versuch über Kulturkämpfe in der modernen Gesellschaft*.



## Day 8

*Is there anyone with half a brain who could say who has won a debate? I don't know anyone. As the candidates turn up with their scripts, it is virtually impossible for a debate to throw a campaign off course. In our private polls no-one can ever say who they think the winner is. It's all made up by the media, which uses the debate to further their own partisan interests. Most of the media say we've won. But I couldn't say that. However, this in and of itself is very interesting. People feel bewildered after the debates because they can't say who's won. They feel stupidly alienated by the mechanics of politics. It's thanks to these sorts of media confrontations that people says things like "they're all the same" and "I don't understand anything about politics". You have to start from this knowledge to approach the rest of the campaign: make your boss as similar as possible to the others, so from that point on his face won't appear in the ads. Only metaphors, fiction and emotion; only resources that hide the specificity of a candidate vis-à-vis the rest. Trying to persuade the voters with political messages and arguments at the end of a campaign is not very effective. The best thing is to reach out through generic images and emotion, not characterised by the candidate. Beyond what the polls reveal, most people say they want to take part in a movement for collective hope, one that gives ordinary people a leading role, with a project which impacts on the daily lives of families, and so on and so forth. At the end of the campaign the emotive ads always work well, the ones everyone can identify with. Except me. However, as the saying goes, I only work here.*

## TV debates

John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon figured in the first great TV duel in 1960. Kennedy was standing for President for the first time and Nixon was seeking election after having been Vice-President. But TV showed how powerful it can be. A badly-shaven, sweating and hard faced Nixon came up against the youthful image of a charismatic and telegenic Kennedy. From then on things were to be different.

One of the most interesting documents about elections dates from the same year. *Primary* (1960), by Robert Drew and made up of images taken by Donn Pennebaker, Albert Maysles and Richard Leacock, is a turning point in the history of the cinema and a milestone in the chronicle of election campaign documentaries. Shot as an experiment and commissioned by *Life* magazine, the film shows the battle between the youthful John F. Kennedy and Hubert Humphrey to win the Democratic nomination for the 1960 Presidential race. This fresh format clicked with a young and resolute Kennedy who was far from the idea of the ready-to-use politician. Some theorists argue that this film marks the start of 'cinéma vérité', which suggests its purpose; a catalytic camera that can trigger the interaction of the subjects that move in front of it.

It was Dominique Wolton who warned us that "The popular and trivial nature of television tends to make it gloss over the questions which really should be thought about." And it is precisely the awareness of this "intellectual laziness" which touches on the phenomenon of TV election campaigns. It is hard to find a medium so embedded in our daily lives and yet at the same time so unreachable and hidden as television, capable of sucking up types, genres, discourses and ideologies like a sponge. Television has been the main means of bringing what is popular into the general sphere of culture and of blurring the barriers between the private and the public. Television has brought politics into homes, but a kind of politics made into a game, a show, the pools, a soap opera, a pastiche, a game show, a drama, a sitcom; an audiovisualisation of politics definitively distanced from people and subjected to the framework of the television set, politics finally made part of one of the questions affecting others that is most beloved by the public at large.

## Day 9

*A product should offer the prospect that it will meet your expectations; a candidate shouldn't. An election advertisement is based on the small interval which connects what the candidate has done – derived from what he'd previously said he'd do – and the chances of guessing that impulse in that face, in that look, in that gesture, in that smile. Yes, people do vote morally even though this may go against their interests. Abstention is above all this: not compromising morality for some mere immediate interests. That's why I think that abstention has become a symbol of individual freedom against democracy. Because democracy names everything and there are some things you can't name. I like people who abstain.*

*What I mean is that in the same way that governments try to take the war to the cities, because all the fronts are always very far away, we take the campaigns to the very centre of social apparatuses, contaminating everything. In the fortnight that a campaign lasts, everything has to be campaigning: a dog, a train, a tomato; everything becomes a symbolic campaign element whether or not the dog or the tomato minds. Every conversation, every joke, every poll must form part of the great script of the campaign.*

*Everything is momentary and a one-off, nothing lasts, but it has to seem the most intense thing in the world. A candidate will say something one day about how much he loves a hamster and people will laugh at him. But if he's clever he'll know he needs to talk about the hamster again however ridiculous it seems. The hamster will be everything, they'll talk about him in newspaper columns; other parties will run ads with mice to make fun of him. No problem; the hamster will become a powerful brand. At the end of the day, it was a politician who said that the important thing is that they talk about you, even if they say bad things.*

*An ad is a face. Everything else is metaphors that give it a frame of reference which it can be associated with. I'll tell you one thing: in ads, the candidates are released from politics, they're just actors. That's the great strength of an ad. The voters judge the candidate as if it were a talent show. The viewer is trapped in its thirty seconds by the morbid and gossipy fascination of seeing "how they do" in front of the spotlights and with the script they've learnt. In the same way, in a debate people are attracted by the "nerves" a candidate experiences when faced with so much pressure: millions of viewers, thousands of communication specialists, the home straight, the opponent turning the screws, dissimulating their own defects. We want a leader and we put them to the test. In short, an electoral campaign is nothing other than the game of psychophagy; the consumption of other people's psychology, and moreover that of the aspirant to be a hero. A campaign means getting everything to be pure emotional shuddering, intensely momentary, designed and destined not to last.*

## Politicians/actors

Electoral campaigns are increasingly similar to one another. Even though a few years ago the differences between the European Union, the United States and Latin America were large, there is an increasing trend to similar staging and even in some cases they become perfectly predictable. One of the features they all share is that the candidates appear as professional actors who are playing their roles in front of different sets and with different scripts that are more or less dramatic or comic depending on the case or agenda. They are expected to be persuasively efficacious and credible on stage, to speak clearly and not hesitate and so on. There is a whole interpretative exercise that, even though it is no longer so important live due to the decreased importance of meetings as cohesive events, has resolutely shifted over to image and video politics.

## Day 10

*Once again it is they who are the undecided. This morning I received clear and precise indications from the party leaders to take the fear route. Of course, that's a strategy we always have in mind. You only have to see the slogan. But the orders were more than precise: "Go for the jugular". It's a bit late for that sort of stuff. I won't go into how much they are shitting themselves at the top – and they are – but rather how delicate going into rubbish bins can turn out to be. Taking the rubbish out into the street to put it in the wrong bin always entails the risk of being seen by a neighbour. The important thing is to get someone else to take it out. It's obvious I have no choice, if I want to get my way in the medium term. We'll go for it, but we'll have to calculate the shock wave carefully. I've already got three of my guys in the audiovisual archives, not only in the ones we have here but also in other parts of the world. We're going to make four ads along the same lines. The first will deal with last year's conflict in Algeria: those tourists who were caught in the police raid after the attack and tried to seek shelter in the embassy only to find no-one would open the doors to them so as not to offend the Algerian government when economic ties were close. Everyone will remember those angry tourists in front of the embassy, thumping the railings and faced with diplomatic silence. Next we'll touch on the President's friendship with the government of Iran, and then on the "open door agreement" with Africa, and we'll finish with the government's encouragement for the Tupamaro movement. It's going to be easy. We'll just edit the material down to ten seconds with a "Can you imagine that?" type ending. I really don't like these kinds of things: it's like going into battle with a borrowed rifle, you never know if it's loaded with real bullets or blanks, and that's not a nice feeling when you have to defend yourself.*

## By land, sea and air

Much has been said about the bellicose language Alfa uses to talk about election campaigns. Expressions such as campaign, war, tactics, front, enemy and so on do not appear to be out of place in the light of the techniques used in political struggles. Although the most well-known part of the work done by political marketing professionals is what is usually called an "air campaign" involving the press, radio and television, the success of an electoral campaign is based on a balance between the air campaign and the "land campaign". A land campaign means getting out on the ground and going into towns, neighbourhoods, streets, markets and so on to get face-to-face contact between the candidate and the voters. However, recent campaigns would suggest that the air dominates, and here we mean only the preponderant use of the media. It could be said that the selling of ideas is increasingly more about selling air. Who's worried about the bodies in the electoral campaign other than as part of the "a body equals a vote" equation?



## Day 11

*The fear campaign has been cancelled, just when we had the ads made... what a waste of time. They've pulled back. Now they believe it could be counterproductive. On the one hand I'm happy about it but on the other I was already thinking about how the press would react to the ads, bringing up everything that happened and putting Miguel in a fix. I'm resigned to chucking them away. I suggested posting them on some internet sites and saying that they were made by the party's youth wing. They loved the idea, although they're so dumb that they don't realise that now the whole world will see them and not just domestic voters. It's their problem.*

*For my part I've suggested a different approach. Sacred campaign rules numbers 7 and 8 are "Never respond to an attack" and "Know how to use questions". When you reply to a gibe, you're playing on their turf; when you ask a question, you force people to answer. Miguel is very sharp. Yesterday he brought out an ad on internet making fun of the boss and calling him a liar. Lies don't exist because they are only pieces of a truth which no-one wants to see. Why don't people want to see the trick? Because then there'd be no show. I'm going to break rule 7, although it remains valid. We're going to counterattack with an ad using figures. I loathe the easy option of numbers but they always work in the short-run. The important thing, by the way, is not the figures but stressing the reliable source you got them from.*

*We made the ad in a day. It's great to see how well money and digital things go together, that the machinery is so well-oiled. It turned out really well. Miguel is in for a surprise. I've left him with no arguments about the "lie". We've simply called them liars as well. War takes place in the midst of confusion. Miguel knows that.*

## Subtitles

Translation is a creative activity and also an open process of interpretation. Moving beyond the literal needs to be accompanied by a willingness to maintain the original meaning, the soul of the sign. Thus in translation meaning is given a different form and there is a growth process in which these (different) forms which have been generated and perhaps enriched can be subjected to certain hazy forces, to a confused and uncontrolled process of decomposition in which forms are transformed in an undesirable way.

The increasingly frequent practice of subtitling election ads has a dual purpose. In addition to reaching the largest possible number of receivers and under any reception conditions, the content of the spot is made literal. The written word thus seals even more seriously the intentions, judgements and promises of the candidate; in some way the attempt is made to turn the receiver into the notary of the proposal, to an extent a contract is entered into and commitment is sought in a more expeditious manner. A subtitled ad is not just any ad; it is a turning point in the campaign which seeks contract and commitment. Its topics refer to "strong vectors" in the strategy of the campaign. The overprinting of text on the image of the ad is a commitment and should be presented as such.



## Day 12

*People think that television is based on selling viewers to advertisers. While the viewers often think about TV programmes as products, of themselves as consumers and of advertising as the price you pay to see these programmes, the truth about the TV business is very different. I see a campaign in the same way, but of course I can't say that out loud. Because a political party is a private company which wants to get customers. That's why they invented political programmes and campaigns. And I'm the fucking circus master. People are stupid because they don't know they are.*

## TV and political marketing

According to a well-known political marketing company, "The central power of television is the image. A lot of research has been done about the perception of TV messages which shows that what the candidate says accounts for less than ten percent of what holds the viewer's attention. Tone of voice, gestures and attitude, that is to say the image per se, is what the viewer registers, much more so than any logic in the argument. This suggests that television should not be used for party or candidate programmes but rather for images that depict trust, firmness, efficacy, authority, ability, renewal, etc. The most effective messages on television are those which make it possible to build the desired image of the candidate in a non-verbal way. Build is used metaphorically here as the most that can be done is to emphasise those traits which the candidate naturally or potentially has. The best results are achieved when aspects which are in strong social demand are put in order of importance based on the real conditions of a candidate and communicated with a very simple and clear verbal argument."

## Television as scenery

As Roberto Alfa shrewdly suggests, all readings of the television phenomenon end up being a vast history. Subjected to the speed of their incessant discourse, the various analyses which attempt to tackle the television phenomenon normally end up exhausted in the search for solid approaches, disorientated in the face of the dispersion of results, subjected to the tyranny of the form and the system to be tackled.

The battle to domesticate this strange presence from the perspective of semiotics and semiology, sociology and pedagogy, art and political commitment, makes us realise that we are the domesticated ones and that this strange and implacable presence (the light emanating from the screen) has not only organised our homes but also seeks to access our consciousness in order to furnish it.

In the great whirlwind of television, an election ad is the great product, the total product, a sort of great condenser of the mediascape, a complete indicator of the established order, a superior form of the narcotic techniques of the image. A product which can be at the same time a pseudo work of art, a product, by-product and space rubbish.

## Day 13

I've often been asked what the basic types of an election campaign are. I have my own catalogue: tears, parody, musical, fiction, animation, catastrophe, firm hand, country and change. There are more but all of them can be subsumed in these. You'll be wondering what these categories have in common as some are concepts and others are narrative formats. Well, they're two sides of the same coin. Plus unless the candidate is a natural communicator, you should never leave him alone in the ad. I remember those ads from a few years ago, when the candidate spouted for five or ten minutes about the advantages and integrity of his party. A right pain. That happened in the age of ideologies, when politics was politics; what's the point of that nowadays? Tears, showing someone bedridden, kids, all of that works well when you want to stress sincerity; at the end of the day kids, drunks, old people and the sick always tell the truth. You can use parody to make fun of the enemy without looking like you're doing it; pure ventriloquism again. And then there's laughter, always a powerful ally. The musical style, which I love, produces jingles and ditties and you can always bring on hundreds of extras who'll anchor it for you. In particular I love the karaoke style, because you fix that message twice. In Latin America, Asia and the United States they are karaoke masters. Then fiction lets you hijack the stereotypes which people have about the candidate, meaning they forget about the clichés for a moment and let themselves be carried away along unexpected routes. Animation is like fiction, but cheaper, especially with those kids you get nowadays who can do wonders with just their laptops and really get inside young people's heads.

In his article "Psicología, lenguaje y política" (1998), seen by many as the fundamental basis for an in-depth understanding of contemporary election campaigns, Alfa suggests, perhaps to foster debate, that the construction of election messages is based on topics which, contrary to what canonical authors on the subject have always averred, cut across themes and concepts. According to Alfa these topics are:

- trust / distrust / corruption / honesty
- future / past / change
- efficiency / inefficiency / curriculum
- patriotism / identity / family / migration
- public services / taxes / welfare
- security / insecurity / fear / hope / justice

What is perhaps most surprising about these conceptual associations is the clear separation between the personal responsibility of the voter in the definition of the moral ideas which guide their vote and the responsibility of the professional politician for handling their application. The politician has all the ability to formulate policy: you can trust or not trust in his honesty, in his ability to offer plausible prospects, to identify signs of identity and formulate them in a wider context, to be not a problem but rather the maker of solutions which additionally find the social consensus required, including among opponents. This series of conceptual pivots seems to exempt the voter from their engagement in the process which generates political debate. In this respect, in a recent interview with *The New York Times*, Roberto Alfa said that "We have to be aware that the voter is increasingly suspicious of what politicians do with their support, and hence logically enough they tend not to associate their vote with the excesses of rulers. This trend is growing over time. People don't want to see themselves as responsible for what is done with the justification of their votes. In fact this is the reason why I think that short, four-year legislatures are much more electorally efficient than six-year ones, where people can feel more disappointed and powerless with the political use of their participation."

Then there are the concepts; the appeal to catastrophe is always rewarding. All you have to do is to choose some tragedy which took place during the legislature, stick in some negative figures, select some unfortunate comment, present it in black and white and Bob's your uncle. If you really want to put fear into the soul, there's no better way. Firm hand; I love that expression. It's multi-purpose: for cleaning, for talking about corruption, honesty, firmness, delinquency, terrorism. And it always works well because it refers to the idea of the protective father, who does everything "for your own good". You have to be careful when you use the word country. It can be easily confused with "fascist" so you have to dress it up with more colloquial words: family, people, community, "us", "ours", etc. Who could be against that? I still remember a campaign I did for a major event some years ago: I put the words "sustainability", "peace" and "tolerance" in the entire promotion, when in fact it was an enormous real estate and political deal. But who on earth would dare to criticise it? And last but not least there is the call for change. For starters, this is the standard resource for a candidate who is standing against another one who has been in office for more than two legislatures: "It's time for change". The list of campaigns based on that slogan is endless. Plus it also goes well with all the other concepts, so it's a sort of metaconcept: change to avoid catastrophe, to protect what's ours, to get rid of corruption or inefficiency.

You'll be wondering where all the big campaign themes are: the economy, education, social services, health. The answer is ruthlessly simple: nowhere. Have you ever seen a candidate go deeply into these things? They've learnt that it's best not to get involved in them during the campaign. If you say you're going to privatise the health system, you'll be rejected by people with health problems or ill relatives; if you say you're going to spend millions on hospitals, firstly no one will believe you and then the businesspeople will eat you alive, plus you'll put off those who have private health insurance, and there are millions of them. Tough stances are bad electoral company. No: when you're talking about the economy, health or education you should only use broad brush strokes; more jobs, shorter queues and less academic failure. Nothing else. Anything more will get you into trouble. So, does anyone really think that it is possible to cut hospital queues? Oh come on...

For Roberto Alfa, every campaign needs to be configured using these six topics, as they are perfectly inclusive or "adherent" to use his own terminology. Furthermore, each of the blocks hosts the doors needed to enter into other blocks: "They are hypertexts which enable people to link themes without needing to cross forced limits," as he would always say in his master classes.



## Day 14

*People are exhausted. The media people haven't slept for three days. In everyone's eyes you can see the desire to get it over with, to stop talking, to shut up. I'll do that too today.*

## Day 15

*I'll say it again: we're going to win around two million votes more. I don't know anything else.*



## Rumour

Roberto Alfa used to say that rumour is the essence of a political campaign. Rumour has unstoppable force. You can't fight it. Fighting it means going into a dynamic of truths and lies that traps all reasoning and pulls it under in a spiral of insuperable difficulties. Rumour propagates itself with unusual speed, reaches all social, professional and cultural layers. Its snowball effect can become a bomb if used perversely; you only have to leave it on and see how it multiplies, where it grows, what forms it takes on and how far it makes an impression on the set goal. By way of example the following is one of Roberto's favourite anecdotes, one which he would always employ to illustrate the dangers of rumour. During the campaign in Italy in World War Two, US intelligence became aware that the German troops at Monte Cassino had not been paid for a number of months. They came up with a psychological warfare campaign consisting of dropping thousands of leaflets on the Germans accusing the German officers of keeping the money. The story was not true, but the intention was to generate distrust and indignation among the rank and file, already traditionally separated from the privileges of their officers. When the German officers heard the rumour they insisted on clearly and forcefully stating that such accusations were false via military radio and newspapers. The outcome was a disaster; soldiers who had not heard about the rumour found out about it, and the suspicions of soldiers about their officers only increased to the point where a tremendous crisis of confidence occurred. Roberto's comment was that a rumour is always supposed to become bigger and its modus operandi is getting people to talk about it. You should never respond to an insidious rumour. It can spoil the most perfectly planned strategy.

## Day 16

*Yesterday's final meeting went well. Even though the journalists are as tired as we are, they were all there working away. I went up into the top tiers of the stands in the stadium, up in the gods. I didn't want to be surrounded by those morons who get in the front row and feel obliged to get to their feet and applaud all the time. I don't have to prove anything. Next to me there was an elderly lady who was looking at everything coldly. She neither applauded nor cheered. She was obviously focused on the event, snatching quick glances at the crowd before turning back to the stage. I was captivated by her. Sitting there with her legs together, her bag in her lap, good-looking and wearing a touch of make-up, she exuded sincerity, enormous tranquillity. I spent a long time staring at her, secretly hoping that she would return my gaze. I managed it when the smoke from one of my cigarettes wafted over to her. She did it slowly, blinking sparingly, like someone who looks without looking, but there was a slight smile on her face. I couldn't help it and went up to her while stubbing out my cigarette. I asked her where she was from. She gave me a long and penetrating look. After a while, she slowly raised both hands as her mouth opened. She moved her fingers but not a word came out of her mouth. She was dumb.*

## A well-aimed insert in mass culture

"Mass culture" or "cultural industry" showed us that the consumer is not the subject but rather the object. The mechanism of this industry has purged its operation and distracted the masses from their real concerns and problems by means of strongly idealised images with which they can identify. While all this was going on, this "mass object" was also imbued with an ideology and values and a conception of the world geared towards its preservation. In this way the fundamental objectives assigned by neo-capitalism to the cultural industry were duly met. Or was it neo-capitalism in itself that was brewing up whilst all of this was taking place?

With this panorama, election ads have taken part in the form and content of the liturgy of a mass culture, providing highly evolved productions and invigorating the eclectic nature of a cultural industry which seeks to reach as many people as possible. Its modus operandi is to shun specialisation and going deeper into issues in favour of bringing together the largest number of elements that enable customers to be won over.



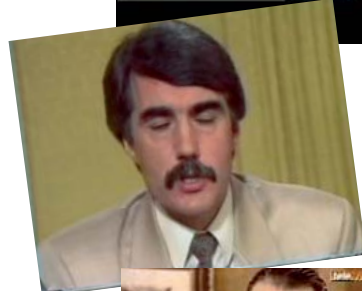
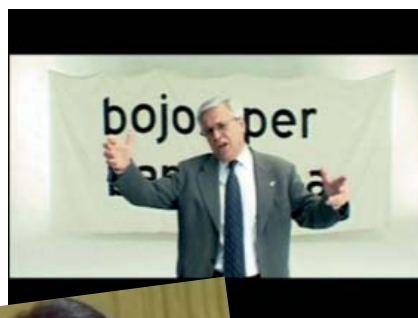
*Election day*

**11.50 am.** *It's Sunday and today there is an election. The meetings, the shoots, the haste and the nerves (some people's, not mine) are over. I got up late. My son insisted on coming to the polling station to see me vote. It took me some time and a few comics to explain to him that I never vote. Because I would never swell the ranks of those who unknowingly legitimise jobs such as mine, in the same way that Groucho would never join a club which would have him as a member. You'll be thinking I'm tired, exhausted, after so many weeks, but that's not the case; no-one gets tired on a machine which works by itself. My wife calls it the "victory machine". I've just heard the turnout polls on TV in the kitchen. There are still those 30 to 40 percent of people who never go to vote. I wish to salute them: people with integrity.*

**7.50 pm.** *It's now 8 pm and I have to go to party HQ. I really don't want to do it. I feel like the winner of a major battle who goes back to the battlefield afterwards and is saddened because he can no longer hear the roar of combat or smell gunpowder in the air. Curiously, when an election finishes and before they go out in front of the media to evaluate the results, the bosses, all of the ones I've had, no longer want to hear what I have to say. I love to see them, especially when they fall, like monarchs who suddenly realise that the degradation of power is implicit in the solitariness of the player. While you keep them next to people for a few weeks they think they can change the world. But when they go back to their palaces they are small megalomaniacs surrounded by nothing. However, all of this leaves me cold, it really does. As a friend of mine likes to say, a medical examiner doesn't like dead people, he just works with them.*

**The victory machine: consultancy as one of the fine arts**

A trip around the various websites on the internet which offer political marketing services gives an idea of the complexity of the electoral phenomenon and its marketing dimension. Going round the virtual sections of one of these companies is to experience the sophisticated poetry of victory in its most contemporary meaning. "Crisis management", "campaign kit" and "electoral software" are some of these sub-sections which disclose a world of possibilities for achieving success. Because "success" and "victory" have a very special rooftop in politics from where you can see (from above) the rooftops of other professional spheres. It is a vantage point that only a few have access to; to begin with, those who can pay for it and hence can always win.

*The day after*

*22,187,000 people voted for us. We've lost the election, but I've won the campaign. I've gone up by almost two million votes. Or to put it another way I've managed to take two million votes off another party... two million. Two million people who have believed, who believe that just for four years, that what I told them sounded true. No-one will ever know the pleasure of influencing the political leanings of so many people. To be honest, I couldn't care less that we've lost. Towards midnight they called to congratulate me, an unmistakable sign that they know, as I do, that the campaign has been mine and the elections theirs. You may think this is weird, but one thing is not the same as the other. Firstly because they will be back on TV today to say the same things as ever, that they'll be doing more and so on, but no-one will remember what I've done in a week's time. Secondly, because I will do a campaign that is identical to this one and no-one will think of saying that that's bad, because no-one will remember that it's already been done before somewhere else at another time. Does anyone remember that I've already used the same slogan in three different campaigns? Of course not.*

*The victory machine: knowledge, experience, method. I like campaigns with maximum impact. A campaign can be conceived and executed with no mistakes when it's directed by a master consultant with twenty successful years of experience in the Americas and Europe, and backed by a team made up of the best international professionals in advertising production and political communication. To achieve victory all you have to do is aim for the top. You can't economise on a campaign, because what's really expensive is losing the election; looking like a dickhead when you go on TV at the end of election night to say that you've won, when in fact they've given you a real hiding.*

*I want to call Miguel, like the boss who's called his opponent to congratulate him. I don't know whether I should. Maybe it's a bit pretentious. Miguel has lost the campaign; one and a half million fewer votes but by contrast his boss has won and will be President. That's the way things are.*

*I've reread the start of this diary and I guess I should really finish it with some reference to that strange feeling which caused me to write it. But it's no longer there. It's gone. It was nothing.*

Will anyone remember the tone of the slogan and the main issues in the campaign?

Will anyone remember the argument, the pyramid argument?

Will the voters ever know how and why the candidate's image was manipulated?

Will voters know what communication theorists mean when they talk about "target groups", "sociodemographic segments", "natural electorate" and "core vote"?

And when someone discovers that the same slogan has been used in three countries in three different campaigns, will it matter? Will it matter when we see the same campaign director working in the USA, Bolivia and Israel? No. There will be only a moment's surprise which will bring us to understand that the market for politics is truly the most global one and that the people who pull its strings in the background are those who move many of the "social emotions" of our small world.